

# 'ASKING TOO MUCH AND OFFERING TOO LITTLE' IN 1974: THE CONSERVATIVE–LIBERAL COALITION

Recently released Cabinet papers have provided new insights into the March 1974 talks between Edward Heath and Jeremy Thorpe over a possible Conservative–Liberal coalition government. **Peter Dorey** re-examines these talks, and notes that their failure went much deeper and wider than the disagreement over electoral reform. They were always hampered by a lack of support among MPs and grassroots members of both parties, convinced that the other was 'asking too much and offering too little' in return. Even if the talks had succeeded, the two leaders would have encountered a lack of support from their parliamentary colleagues.

Jeremy Thorpe arrives at 10 Downing Street, 2 March 1974

**T**HE GENERAL election held on 28 February 1974 yielded a highly ambiguous and constitutionally intriguing result. The Conservative Party won five fewer seats than the Labour Party – 296 to 301 – yet polled 240,000 votes more. Meanwhile, the Liberal Party won 14 seats (8 more than in 1970), although they had actually polled six million votes, thereby starkly illustrating the iniquity of Britain's voting system. With neither Labour nor the Conservatives having secured an overall parliamentary majority, Edward Heath was faced with the choice of either immediately conceding defeat, and thus tendering his resignation forthwith, or seeking a deal with one or more of the smaller parties. Heath pursued the latter option, observing that as neither of the two main parties had secured an overall majority 'My responsibility as Prime Minister at the time was to see whether I could form an administration with a majority'.<sup>1</sup> He thereby heralded what one minister subsequently described as 'two days [of] rather unseemly bargaining',<sup>2</sup> at the end of which the Conservatives 'were beginning to give the impression that we were bad losers'.<sup>3</sup>

**I** At the end of Friday afternoon (1 March), by which time the parliamentary situation arising from the election result had become much more apparent (although the results in one or two remote Scottish constituencies, such

as Argyll, were not announced until the Saturday<sup>4</sup>), 'a tired and downcast fag-end of a Cabinet'<sup>5</sup> met to hear Edward Heath delineate the three options available to them. These were: to concede defeat, and thereby advise the Queen to invite Harold Wilson (the Labour Party leader) to form a minority administration; to consider whether the Conservatives themselves could continue as a minority government, in the hope that the party could secure overall parliamentary support for a policy programme to tackle Britain's urgent economic situation; and, finally, to seek support from the smaller parties for a programme which would address these immediate problems.

The Conservatives were naturally reluctant to concede defeat immediately, partly because they had actually polled nearly a quarter of a million more votes than Labour, but also because ministers were anxious that if Labour formed a government and subsequently accrued the economic benefits of North Sea oil (which was just about to flow fully 'on stream'), then the ensuing economic upturn would rebound to Labour's political advantage in the next general election.<sup>6</sup> Yet ministers also appreciated that the second option – attempting to continue in office as a minority government and relying on general parliamentary support for its policies – would not only entail too much instability and uncertainty, but it would also 'not be honourable' and would create a clear and damaging impression beyond Westminster that the Conservatives were

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'hanging on to office at all costs despite defeat at the election', in which case the party risked being seriously 'discredited'.<sup>7</sup>

Having vowed not to relinquish political office immediately, however, Heath and his ministerial colleagues ruled out a political alliance with either the Ulster Unionists or the Scottish National Party (SNP).

Although the (Official) Ulster Unionists had returned 9 MPs (there were also two additional Unionist MPs not linked to the Ulster Unionist Party, and who were therefore discounted in this context), most of whom ordinarily took the Conservative whip in the House of Commons, many of them had, in this election, stood on an 'anti-Sunningdale' platform, explicitly opposing the power-sharing Executive and Assembly established in Northern Ireland by the Heath government the previous year. In so doing, they had made it clear that they would continue to oppose Heath's current policies concerning Northern Ireland, even though they would probably support him on most other issues. Consequently, Heath adjudged the UUP to be 'unreliable' potential allies, and thereby ruled out a deal with them.

At the same time, a deal with the SNP – which had achieved the election of 7 MPs – was ruled out after informal talks between Conservative MP Teddy Taylor's agent (who had been a member of the SNP prior to joining the Conservatives) and Bill Lindsay, Vice President of the SNP. Taylor informed Heath that the SNP seemed amenable to a deal whereby they would support the Heath government in any parliamentary confidence votes in return for the creation of a Scottish Assembly.<sup>8</sup> After all, the previous year had witnessed the publication of the Kilbrandon Report, which recommended devolution for Scotland (and Wales), albeit with divergent views over the actual form that this might take. Moreover, in a

speech in Perth in 1968, Heath had expressed his support for a directly elected Scottish Assembly, although there was little enthusiasm for such an institution amongst his parliamentary colleagues – devolution 'had always sat lightly on the shoulders of Conservative MPs'.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, when the Kilbrandon Report was published in 1973, Heath's own response was rather more circumspect than might have been expected given his Perth speech. In contrast, it had become apparent that the SNP wanted a Scottish Assembly established immediately, and imbued with greater powers than those proposed by the Kilbrandon Report, including a degree of 'fiscal autonomy'. Such a stance thus effectively ruled out a deal between the Heath Government and the SNP.

### II

Having rejected the options of a political partnership with either the Ulster Unionists or the SNP, Heath – with the full endorsement of his Cabinet colleagues – turned to the Liberal Party in an increasingly desperate attempt to remain in office. It was reckoned that three options were available to the Cabinet. The first was to secure an undertaking by the Liberals to provide parliamentary support for 'any policies and measures introduced by a Conservative administration which seemed to them right and justifiable in the national interest', while remaining free to oppose other policies. Secondly, the Conservatives could seek a parliamentary pact whereby the Liberals would provide parliamentary support for a package of policies over which they had been consulted, and which would constitute the basis of the government's legislative programme for the next session. The third option would be to form a coalition government, with a Cabinet post for Jeremy Thorpe, and one or two

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ministerial posts offered to other senior Liberals.<sup>10</sup>

The Cabinet generally agreed that the third option, 'the formation of a right-centre coalition', was the most attractive and feasible of the three, not least because the combined 17,900,000 votes won by the Conservatives and the Liberals, compared to the 11,700,000 polled by the Labour Party, was interpreted as evidence of 'a large anti-Socialist majority' in Britain. Certainly, one or two senior figures were favourably disposed towards this option almost solely on the grounds that 'a coalition with the Liberals would keep the Labour Party out',<sup>11</sup> while other senior Conservatives acknowledged that the Liberal Party supported two of the key policies in the Conservative manifesto, namely the continuation of a statutory incomes policy (as a vital means of curbing inflation) which would eventually be replaced by a voluntary incomes policy, and British membership of the (then) European Economic Community (EEC).<sup>12</sup> A Conservative–Liberal coalition formed on this basis, ministers agreed, could thus serve 'to unite the moderates in the country'.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, Heath himself noted that the Conservative Party and the Liberals together had obtained 57 per cent of votes cast, which under a system of proportional representation would have secured a clear majority of parliamentary seats.<sup>14</sup> This observation proved rather ironic, given that Heath and his ministerial colleagues subsequently refused to accede to the Liberals' insistence on a clear commitment to electoral reform, thereby precipitating the breakdown of the inter-party talks, and thus the resignation of the Heath government.

### III

Having discussed these options with his Cabinet colleagues, and obtained their approval

for approaching the Liberals, Edward Heath invited Jeremy Thorpe, the Liberal leader, to 10 Downing Street from his Barnstaple constituency in Devon, where the latter had been celebrating the Liberals' remarkable 19 per cent share of the national vote. Although hindsight suggests that it was entirely understandable that the Conservatives should seek a political deal with the Liberals, at the time the invitation by Heath was an initiative that the Liberal Party 'was totally unprepared for'.<sup>15</sup>

When Thorpe arrived at Downing Street on Saturday afternoon, an 80-minute meeting ensued (at which the only other person present was Heath's Private Secretary, Robert Armstrong), which Heath opened by delineating the three broad options available to them: 'a loose arrangement' whereby the Liberals 'could pick and choose which governmental measures they supported'; full consultation over the contents of the Queen's Speech, which the Liberals would then support; and a coalition government, in which Thorpe himself would be offered a Cabinet seat (although the precise post was not specified at this juncture). Heath then intimated to Thorpe that his (and the Cabinet's) preference was for the third of these options.<sup>16</sup>

It is worth noting here that the offer of a Cabinet seat to Thorpe subsequently gave rise to rather divergent accounts by the two party leaders. Heath claimed that Thorpe intimated 'a strong preference for the post of Home Secretary', although Heath himself maintained that 'I made no such offer to him', particularly as the Cabinet Secretary had warned Heath, prior to the meeting, that 'there were matters in Thorpe's private life, as yet undisclosed to the public, which might make this a highly unsuitable position for him to hold'.<sup>17</sup> Yet Thorpe maintained that he neither demanded nor indicated any expectation that

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he be appointed Home Secretary in a coalition Cabinet. Moreover, Thorpe claimed that he subsequently learned 'from a reliable source' that Heath envisaged offering him a ministerial post in the Foreign Office, with specific responsibility for Europe.<sup>18</sup>

In response to Heath's delineation of the three options (and his expressed preference for the third, namely a coalition), Thorpe began by asking whether Heath had contemplated a 'Grand Alliance' of all three main parliamentary parties (Conservative, Labour and Liberal), with a view to forming a National Unity government to tackle the grave economic situation facing the country. Heath swiftly rejected the idea, pointing out that, apart from any other considerations, such a move would split the Labour Party (as it had done in 1931), and whilst many Conservatives might relish such a prospect, Heath was sure that the Labour leader, Harold Wilson, would 'wish at all costs to avoid the role and fate of Ramsay Macdonald'. Moreover, the Labour Party had already issued a statement ruling out any deals with other parties, including the formation of a coalition government. Clearly, Heath explained, this meant that a Conservative-Liberal parliamentary pact or coalition government remained the most viable and attractive option.

For his part, Thorpe remained relatively guarded, emphasising the natural need to consult his senior colleagues before offering a response, but in lieu of such consultation, Thorpe sought Heath's views on various other issues prominent at that particular juncture, most notably the government's stance on a pay deal for the miners, which was expected to be recommended by the Pay Board in a few days' time, and the fate of the Industrial Relations Act. He also asked Heath what 'dramatic changes' he envisaged making to the Conservative Party's programme in order to accommodate a political

agreement with the Liberals, to which Heath retorted that both sides would probably need 'to agree to postpone a number of policies and measures which they would have thought desirable in other circumstances', although these would probably be policies of lower priority compared to those necessary to tackle the short-term economic situation. To this end, Heath informed Thorpe, on a highly confidential Privy Councillor basis, of some of the economic measures under consideration, including an approach to the International Monetary Fund.

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#### IV

It was during that Sunday, 3 March, however, that the difficulties materialised which were ultimately to contribute to the eventual collapse of the coalition talks between Heath and Thorpe. Thorpe consulted three of his most senior colleagues – his predecessor, Jo Grimond, David Steel (the Liberals' chief whip), and Lord Byers (the Liberals' leader in the House of Lords) – over Sunday lunch, although many other Liberals, both inside and outside Parliament, were considerably uneasy, fearing 'that some deal was being concocted'. In fact, the four senior Liberals



**Edward Heath  
and Jeremy  
Thorpe**

were agreeing at the time that the terms offered by Heath were inadequate as the basis for Liberal entry into a coalition government with the Conservatives, particularly as there was no firm commitment to introducing electoral reform.<sup>20</sup> Yet in jumping to the wrong conclusions over Thorpe's 'elite-level' discussions, it may be that Liberal MPs were henceforth inclined to view almost any subsequent proposals with unwarranted scepticism, thereby making it even harder for Thorpe to secure an agreement with either his own party or with Heath.

Beyond this potential problem, the first main difficulty

affecting the putative coalition talks concerned the issue of electoral reform, which most Liberals deemed to be non-negotiable, and thus the prerequisite of any parliamentary pact or coalition with the Conservatives. Given that Heath had already alluded to the lower priority which this issue should enjoy in the (economic) circumstances – quite apart from the Conservatives' own lack of enthusiasm for it – the insistence of other Liberals on the primacy of this issue was bound to prove problematic.

However, it transpired that Thorpe had encountered an even more immediate and 'rather embarrassing' problem with his parliamentary colleagues, namely their unwillingness to serve under or support a Conservative administration led by Heath himself. This problem was initially reported to Heath indirectly, following a telephone call to Robert Armstrong (Heath's Private Secretary) from Conservative MP Nigel Fisher, who had himself been telephoned by Thorpe (the two of them were close friends, in spite of their political differences). Thorpe was at pains to emphasise that this was certainly not a view which he personally shared, for although he acknowledged that he was 'not very close to Ted', he considered him to be 'by far the most able man' to lead the country at that moment, and as such, Thorpe himself would have been perfectly happy to serve under him.<sup>21</sup> Nonetheless, many of his Liberal colleagues 'had many grave reservations about him [Heath] leading a coalition, partly because they had been highly critical of Heath's "handling of the miners" dispute before the election',<sup>22</sup> but also because while it was difficult to discern who had actually won the election, 'we did know who had lost it.'<sup>23</sup>

Incidentally, Heath might have taken some comfort from another telephone call, this time from former Labour MP,

Woodrow Wyatt, who advised that if a deal with the Liberals did not materialise, he should seek a short-term coalition with the Labour Party, his reasoning being that if Labour refused, 'they will look very bad', whereas if they accepted, they would have to share responsibility for the necessary austerity measures. Either way, Wyatt advised Heath, 'you would look very good and come out of it very well'.<sup>24</sup>

When Thorpe subsequently phoned Heath himself early on Sunday evening, the Liberal leader made no allusion to having already spoken to Nigel Fisher earlier in the day, but did report to Heath – 'it is no good beating about the bush' – the concerns of other Liberal MPs about the Conservative leadership. Nonetheless, Thorpe expressed his confidence that this particular issue as not 'insuperable ... I can handle my party on that issue'. What was likely to prove more problematic, Thorpe warned, was the issue of electoral reform, for this was the issue that his colleagues 'feel somewhat hard about', to the extent that there would need to be some concrete proposals 'before there could be talk about an agreed package of economic proposals'. If something could be agreed concerning electoral reform before the end of the year (1974), Thorpe suggested, then the Liberals might feel able and willing to move beyond offering 'general support from the Opposition bench to actual coalition', whereas entering a coalition under the existing voting system would be viewed by many Liberals as 'simply putting their heads under a chopper'.

The issue of electoral reform subsequently yielded somewhat divergent accounts of these talks, for according to Heath's account of their first meeting, Thorpe 'raised the subject of proportional representation', and when Heath had a subsequent meeting with his Cabinet colleagues, it was 'with particular reference

to proportional representation.<sup>25</sup> Margaret Thatcher too refers explicitly to the Liberals' insistence on proportional representation, hence her claim (see below) that to accede to their demand would have meant that the Conservatives would never form a majority government again.<sup>26</sup> For his part, however, Thorpe insists that: 'The term proportional representation was never used' when he sought a commitment from Heath that a coalition Cabinet would introduce electoral reform.<sup>27</sup>

In fact, Thorpe *did* use the term 'proportional representation', but explicitly with regard to electoral reform for borough council elections, while recommending the alternative vote for rural (shire) elections. There was, however, no specific recommendation from Thorpe as to what type of electoral system should be adopted for general elections. The important point at this stage, Thorpe emphasised, was for Heath to pledge the establishment of a Speaker's Conference on electoral reform, to report before the end of the year, whereupon its recommendations (if acceptable to the Liberals, of course) would be enacted in the following parliamentary session. If this course of action could be undertaken, then the Liberals would subsequently be willing to countenance the transition from parliamentary support for the Conservative government to participation in it through joining a coalition. Without such a course of action, however, most Liberal MPs would almost certainly conclude that from their perspective, 'the difference between a minority Labour and a minority Conservative government are matters which are outside their control'.

Thus it was that this second round of talks was brought to an end, in order that Thorpe and Heath could conduct further consultations with their senior colleagues. Thorpe did apologise to Heath for the fact that his

Liberal colleagues appeared to be proving somewhat intransigent on this issue (the implication being that Thorpe himself would much more readily have reached an agreement with Heath), acknowledging that 'this is obviously hell – a nightmare on stilts for you'.<sup>28</sup> Certainly Thorpe recalled that 'I don't think I left him [Heath] very sanguine about the chance of success' when leaving to consult the Parliamentary Liberal Party.<sup>29</sup>

Following these consultations during the Sunday evening, Heath and Thorpe held another meeting at 10.30pm to discuss the respective outcomes. That there was little progress on their earlier discussions was indicated by the fact that this meeting only lasted for thirty minutes. Heath explained that his senior colleagues had become even more convinced over the weekend that nothing less than a coalition with the Liberals would suffice in order to provide the country with the degree of political stability that the economic situation warranted. An agreement by the Liberals merely to support the government from the opposition bench in the House of Commons would not be sufficient. Furthermore, Heath insisted that if the Conservatives were to remain in office at this juncture, it would be under his continued leadership, which, he emphasised, was supported by his senior colleagues.

With regard to the Liberals' demand that a Speaker's Conference on electoral reform be established, with its recommendations being implemented in the following parliamentary session, Heath reported that while there was little objection to such a conference in principle, he could not guarantee that its findings would prove acceptable to the Parliamentary Conservative Party and as such, could not promise that whatever was recommended by a Speaker's Conference would

be given legislative effect by his Cabinet colleagues. Moreover, he pointed out, electoral reform had always been a matter for the House of Commons itself, expressing its view by means of a free vote.

Needless to say, Heath's position was effectively matched by Thorpe's stance on behalf of the Liberal Party, namely that there could be no coalition or parliamentary agreement between the two parties without a firmer commitment from the Cabinet with regard to electoral reform. Thorpe reiterated that the Liberal Party would see little difference between a minority Conservative government and a Labour government, and would, therefore, not be inclined to do a deal with either of them.<sup>30</sup> Thorpe was convinced that 'unless the Cabinet took a collective view in favour of reform and made it a vote of confidence in the government, no reform would have any chance of going through Parliament whilst the Conservative Party continued to favour the present first-past-the-post system.'<sup>31</sup> This meeting therefore ended with no clear decision one way or another, beyond Heath and Thorpe agreeing to conduct further consultations with their respective senior colleagues the next (Monday) morning. It was evident, however, that a 'deal' was looking increasingly unlikely.

This was confirmed the following morning, when Heath and Thorpe reaffirmed that their – or, rather, their senior colleagues' – positions had not subsequently altered. Following a Cabinet meeting at 10.00am, Heath wrote to Thorpe to reiterate the Conservatives' view that nothing less than the participation of the Liberals in government (i.e., a coalition) could provide the requisite political stability, but at the same time, the Cabinet could only offer a Speaker's Conference on electoral reform, whose recommendations would then be subject to a free vote in Parliament.<sup>32</sup>

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In reply, Thorpe insisted that this was an inadequate basis for cooperation between the Liberals and the Conservatives. He did suggest, however, that in view of the urgency of the economic problems facing the country at the time, 'a Government of national unity' should be formed, comprising members from all of the main parliamentary parties.<sup>33</sup> The latter option was firmly rejected by Heath (the Cabinet had, earlier that morning, acknowledged that the time might come when a national unity government would become necessary, but not just yet), who cited a statement by the Labour Party that it would not be willing to enter into any such coalition. The only option now, Heath explained, was to tender his resignation forthwith.<sup>34</sup>

**V**

That the coalition talks failed to yield a Conservative–Liberal administration was not solely due to disagreements over the issue of electoral reform, vitally important though this was, of course. What also undermined Heath's attempts at crafting a coalition with the Liberals was the antipathy towards such a venture which existed amongst senior figures in both parties, an opposition which was undoubtedly often closely linked to policy disagreements, but which also derived from unease at the clear impression of short-term opportunism which such a coalition would engender, and which might ultimately damage the credibility and popularity of both parties at the next general election, to the Labour Party's electoral advantage.

Within the Conservative Party, Norman Tebbit recalls that his surprise at Heath's refusal immediately to accept that he had lost, and resign accordingly, 'turned to real anger' when it became evident that 'he was seeking Liberal support for a coalition government.' Moreover, Tebbit was sure that

the bulk of the Conservative Party was opposed to such a deal, especially if it might eventually lead to the adoption of proportional representation.<sup>35</sup> This had been confirmed at the Monday morning Cabinet meeting, when it had also been noted that many Conservatives were convinced that the Liberals were 'asking too much and offering too little'.<sup>36</sup>

Similarly, Margaret Thatcher's 'own instinctive feeling was that the party with the largest number of seats in the House of Commons was justified in expecting that they would be called to try to form a new government', and whilst she obviously deeply disliked the notion of the Labour Party benefiting from the Tories' travails, this was probably preferable to a Conservative–Liberal coalition from which the Liberals secured the prize of electoral reform – in which case the Conservative Party would never form a majority government again.<sup>37</sup>

Meanwhile, one of Heath's closest colleagues at the time, William Whitelaw, had appeared on television on the Friday morning immediately following polling day to comment on the election results, declaring that 'if Labour seemed to have won most seats, then they had ... effectively won the election', which meant that 'any effort in 1974 by the Conservatives and Liberals to form a coalition together against Labour would have been very unpopular and thus doomed to early failure'. Whitelaw subsequently accounted for this somewhat injudicious assertion by claiming that he had felt unwell earlier that morning, and that whilst he had felt able to proceed with the television interview, the medicine he took to alleviate his feverish symptoms 'completely dulled my memory and my senses', to the extent that 'I had absolutely no subsequent recollection of my interview ... nor of the somewhat

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controversial remark I made at the time.' Whitelaw subsequently maintained, however, that his televised comments were a genuine reflection of his views on the political situation at that time, and that the failure of the coalition talks 'was the correct outcome' constitutionally, even though it heralded 'a weak minority Labour government'.<sup>38</sup> Heath was evidently forgiving of Whitelaw's indiscretion, because he nonetheless invited him to join ministerial colleagues in London to discuss their options that weekend, but Whitelaw was not well enough to undertake the long journey from his Penrith & Border constituency.

Also believing that it was 'just as well' that the coalition talks failed was Peter Carrington, who later acknowledged that the electorate would not 'have taken kindly to the two minority parties (in the immediate past being most abusive about each other) making common cause to form a Government and to exclude the majority party, however tenuous the majority was'.<sup>39</sup>

Such comments, particularly as they emanated from senior figures spanning the ideological strands in the Conservative Party at that time, suggest that even if Heath had managed to secure a commitment from Thorpe to enter a coalition, many Conservatives themselves would have been antipathetic. Certainly, the parliamentary majority that would have been attained by a Conservative–Liberal coalition would still have been extremely narrow, and thus highly susceptible to 'cross-voting' or abstentions by even a handful of disgruntled MPs in either party. The ensuing image of weakness and lack of authority would probably have done lasting damage to the Conservative Party's reputation for statecraft and strong government, an important consideration which doubtless led many Conservatives to conclude that in the short term, allowing a

minority Labour government to be formed was the lesser of two evils (although as noted above, there was also some concern that a Labour administration might subsequently benefit from North Sea oil revenues).

Furthermore, there was considerable antipathy in the Parliamentary Conservative Party to pursuing a political alliance with a Liberal Party which 'had been the main beneficiary, if not the cause, of the Government's loss of support', and as such, many Conservatives were strongly inclined to 'leave the Liberal Party alone', while anticipating that much of its increased support would dissipate in the next election, whereupon many of those who had voted Liberal in February 1974 would 'return' to the Conservatives, suitably chastened by their folly.<sup>40</sup>

## VI

One might have expected rather more enthusiasm from the Liberals for a Conservative–Liberal coalition, for participation in such a government would ostensibly have raised the Liberal Party's profile and enhanced their credibility after decades of electoral decline and parliamentary marginalisation. However, the Liberals' antipathy went wider and deeper than the obvious disagreements with the Conservative leadership over electoral reform (or, rather, the absence of it), and disapproval of Heath's refusal to resign the Conservative leadership, having failed to win the election. Certainly, many, if not most, Liberal MPs were generally hostile to such a partnership in the political circumstances pertaining at the time, this hostility being underpinned by a concomitant calculation that a coalition would be unsustainable in practice – in which case, another general election would probably have to be called, whereupon the Liberal Party was likely to be 'punished' by voters for

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propping up the Heath government, and thereby destroying the significant progress achieved by the Liberals in February 1974. Indeed, this consideration was particularly pertinent given that much of the Liberal Party's electoral success in February 1974 had accrued from erstwhile Conservative voters defecting to the Liberals, to the extent that in many constituencies, the Conservatives, rather than Labour, were the Liberals' main rivals. In this context, more prescient Liberals adjudged that entering a coalition with the Conservatives would appear to many voters to be highly opportunistic, thereby undermining the Liberal Party's perennial claim to offer a new kind of politics which transcended the opportunism, partisan self-interest and 'short-termism' which the Liberals attributed to the Labour and Conservative Parties. It was also considered that the almost inevitable failure of a fragile Conservative–Liberal coalition would cause immense harm to the Liberal Party's own credibility and longer-term political prospects.

Certainly, with the Conservative and Labour parties' combined share of the vote in February 1974 having fallen to 75 per cent (this heralding a new era of partisan dealignment in British politics), and the Liberal Party having correspondingly increased its share to 19 per cent, many Liberals were of the view that their party's future electoral prospects would best be served by *not* aligning themselves with either of the main parties, but by maintaining their independence and 'equidistance', and thus their integrity. This, it was envisaged, would leave the Liberal Party well placed to attract further support from the growing numbers of disillusioned, dealigned voters in subsequent elections.

Besides, as Jeremy Thorpe's predecessor as Liberal leader, Jo Grimond, observed, a Conservative–Liberal coalition would

still have been in a minority unless support was offered by the SNP's 7 MPs, and as such, the putative coalition 'would have been strangled at birth.' For all of these reasons, therefore, Grimond observed that: 'The Liberal Party at that time were hostile to any arrangement with the Tories', one which, in any case, 'could not have got over the first hurdle of a vote of confidence' in Parliament 'unless extra support could have been drummed up from the minority parties.'<sup>41</sup> Similarly, according to a Conservative participant in the ministerial discussions that 'dreadful' weekend, two other prominent Liberal MPs, David Steel and Cyril Smith, were not interested in any coalition with the Tories. Indeed, it is suggested that had Jeremy Thorpe agreed to enter a coalition with the Conservatives, 'his Parliamentary Party would have split.'<sup>42</sup> Certainly, David Steel recalls that when Thorpe met his parliamentary colleagues on Monday 4 March, in lieu of making a final decision over Heath's invitation to form a coalition, 'it became clear that the almost universal view was that we should not go into a Heath government'.<sup>43</sup> Moreover, just as Conservative opponents of a deal felt that the Liberals were asking too much and offering too little, so did many Liberals feel that by asking them to enter a coalition while offering only a Speaker's Conference and a parliamentary free vote on electoral reform, it was the Conservatives who were asking too much and offering too little.

A further reason for Liberal reluctance to make a deal with the Conservatives, particularly in the form of a coalition, was the fear that 'they would, sooner or later, be swallowed up'.<sup>44</sup> There was undoubtedly a suspicion that this was one of the reasons why senior Conservatives were apparently so keen to persuade the Liberals to join a coalition. Such scepticism



and antipathy towards doing a deal with the Conservatives was certainly not confined to Liberal MPs, for it was subsequently alleged that 'Liberal activists were ... up in arms at the suggestion that the party ... might lend itself to propping up a defeated Tory government'.<sup>45</sup> Indeed, it has been suggested that if Thorpe had agreed to form a coalition with Heath's Conservatives – 'For himself, he would have loved to have been able to accept'<sup>46</sup> – it would almost certainly have prompted 'a far-reaching split in the Liberal Party', for the 'radical anti-Tory mood in the Party was strong', as articulated in the communications submitted to Liberal headquarters in London throughout the weekend.<sup>47</sup>

It is evident, therefore, that while the Conservative Party's refusal to offer a firm commitment to introducing electoral reform is the most obvious and well-publicised reason for the eventual breakdown of the Conservative–Liberal coalition talks during the first four days of March 1974, these talks were always hampered by a lack of support among the MPs and grassroots members of both parties. Heath and Thorpe conducted their negotiations, increasingly cognizant of the fact that many of their Conservative and Liberal colleagues on the backbenches were unenthusiastic about, or even hostile to, any deal between them, and with MPs in both parties convinced that the other was 'asking too much and offering too little' in return. As such, even if Heath and Thorpe had succeeded in agreeing the basis of a coalition, they would almost certainly have encountered a distinct and damaging lack of support from their respective parliamentary colleagues.

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- 1 Quoted in David Butler and Denis Kavanagh, *The British General Election of February 1974* (London: Macmillan, 1974), p. 253.
- 2 Geoffrey Howe, *Conflict of Loyalty* (London: Macmillan, 1994), p. 81.
- 3 James Prior, *A Balance of Power* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1986), p. 95.
- 4 Butler and Kavanagh, *The British General Election of February 1974*, p. 258.
- 5 Margaret Thatcher, *The Path to Power* (London: HarperCollins, 1995), p. 238.
- 6 National Archives CAB 128/53, CM (74) 9<sup>th</sup> conclusions, 1 March 1974.
- 7 National Archives, PREM 16/231, Robert Armstrong [Heath's Private Secretary] 'Note for the Record: Events Leading to the Resignation of Mr. Heath's Administration on 4 March 1974', 16 March 1974.
- 8 National Archives, PREM 15/2069, 'F.E.R.B to Heath', 2 March 1974.
- 9 Vernon Bogdanor, 'Devolution' in Zig Layton-Henry (ed.), *Conservative Politics* (London: Macmillan, 1980), p. 88.
- 10 National Archives, PREM 15/2069, 'Points for Talk with Mr. Thorpe', 2 March 1974; 'Note for the Record: Minutes of meeting between Edward Heath and Jeremy Thorpe, held on 2 March 1974', 3 March 1974.
- 11 Norman St John-Stevas, *The Two Cities* (Faber, 1984), p. 71.
- 12 National Archives CAB 128/53, CM (74) 9<sup>th</sup> conclusions, 1 March 1974, Jeremy Thorpe, *In My Own Time: Reminiscences of a Liberal Leader* (London, Politico's, 1999), p. 114.
- 13 National Archives CAB 128/53, CM (74) 9<sup>th</sup> conclusions, 1 March 1974.
- 14 Edward Heath, *The Course of My Life: My Autobiography* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1998), p. 519.
- 15 David Steel, *A House Divided: The Lib-Lab Pact and the Future of British Politics* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1980), p. 14.
- 16 Heath, *The Course of My Life*, p. 518.
- 17 Ibid.
- 18 Thorpe, *In My Own Time*, p. 115.
- 19 National Archives, PREM 15/2069
- 20 Steel, *A House Divided*, pp. 14–15.
- 21 National Archives, PREM 15/2069, Robert Armstrong, 'Note of Telephone Conversation with Nigel Fisher', 3 March 1974.
- 22 Most Liberals were also critical of the militancy of the NUM in its pursuit of the strike, but there was nonetheless considerable sympathy in the party with the miners' case per se.
- 23 Thorpe, *In My Own Time*, p. 115.
- 24 National Archives, PREM 15/2069, 'Record of Telephone message from Woodrow Wyatt to Edward Heath', 3 March 1974.
- 25 Heath, *The Course of My Life*, p. 518.
- 26 Thatcher, *The Path to Power*, p. 239.
- 27 Thorpe, *In My Own Time*, p. 115.
- 28 National Archives, PREM 15/2069, 'Transcript of Telephone Conversation between Edward Heath and Jeremy Thorpe', 3 March 1974.
- 29 Thorpe, *In My Own Time*, p. 115.
- 30 Of course, three years later, the Liberal Party did do a deal with a minority Labour government, when it joined the Lib-Lab Pact.
- 31 Thorpe, *In My Own Time*, p. 116.
- 32 National Archives, PREM 15/2069, Heath to Thorpe, 4 March 1974 (morning).
- 33 National Archives, PREM 15/2069, Thorpe to Heath, 4 March 1974.
- 34 National Archives, PREM 15/2069, Heath to Thorpe, 4 March 1974 (afternoon). See also CAB 128/53, CM (74) 11<sup>th</sup> conclusions, 4 March 1974.
- 35 Norman Tebbit, *Upwardly Mobile* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson), 1988, p. 134.
- 36 National Archives, CAB 128/53, CM (74) 10<sup>th</sup> conclusions, 4 March 1974.
- 37 Thatcher, *The Path to Power*, p. 239.
- 38 William Whitelaw, *The Whitelaw Memoirs* (London: Aurum, 1989), pp. 133–34, 135.
- 39 Lord (Peter) Carrington, *Reflect on Things Past: The Memoirs of Lord Carrington* (London: Collins, 1988), p. 266.
- 40 National Archives, PREM 16/231, Robert Armstrong, 'Note for the

- Record: Events Leading to the Resignation of Mr Heath's Administration on 4 March 1974', 16 March 1974. 42 Prior, *A Balance of Power*, p. 95.
- 41 Jo Grimond, *Memoirs* (London: Heinemann, 1979), p. 232–33. 43 Steel, *A House Divided*, p. 14.
- 44 National Archives, PREM 16/231, Robert Armstrong, 'Note for the Record: Events Leading to the Resignation of Mr. Heath's Administration on 4 March 1974', 16 March 1974. 47 Butler and Kavanagh, *The British General Election of February 1974*, p. 258.
- 45 John Campbell, *Edward Heath: A Biography* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1993), pp. 616–17.
- 46 *Ibid.*, p. 616.

## RESEARCH IN PROGRESS

If you can help any of the individuals listed below with sources, contacts, or any other information — or if you know anyone who can — please pass on details to them. Details of other research projects in progress should be sent to the Editor (see page 3) for inclusion here.

**Letters of Richard Cobden (1804–65).** Knowledge of the whereabouts of any letters written by Cobden in private hands, autograph collections, and obscure locations in the UK and abroad for a complete edition of his letters. (For further details of the Cobden Letters Project, please see [www.uea.ac.uk/his/research/projects/cobden](http://www.uea.ac.uk/his/research/projects/cobden)). Dr Anthony Howe, School of History, University of East Anglia, Norwich NR4 7TJ; [a.c.howe@uea.ac.uk](mailto:a.c.howe@uea.ac.uk).

**Cornish Methodism and Cornish political identity, 1918–1960s.** Researching the relationship through oral history. Kayleigh Milden, Institute of Cornish Studies, Hayne Corfe Centre, Sunningdale, Truro TR1 3ND; [KMSMilden@aol.com](mailto:KMSMilden@aol.com).

**Liberal foreign policy in the 1930s.** Focusing particularly on Liberal anti-appeasers. Michael Kelly, 12 Collinbridge Road, Whitewell, Newtownabbey, Co. Antrim BT36 7SN; [mmjkelly@msn.com](mailto:mmjkelly@msn.com).

**The Liberal Party's political communication, 1945–2002.** PhD thesis. Cynthia Messeleka-Boyer, 12 bis chemin Vaysse, 81150 Terrasac, France; +33 6 10 09 72 46; [cynthiandrea@aol.com](mailto:cynthiandrea@aol.com).

**Liberal policy towards Austria-Hungary, 1905–16.** Andrew Gardner, 17 Upper Ramsey Walk, Canonbury, London N1 2RP; [agardner@ssees.ac.uk](mailto:agardner@ssees.ac.uk).

**The Liberal revival 1959–64.** Focusing on both political and social factors. Any personal views, relevant information or original material from Liberal voters, councillors or activists of the time would be very gratefully received. Holly Towell, 52a Cardigan Road, Headingley, Leeds LS6 3BJ; [his3ht@leeds.ac.uk](mailto:his3ht@leeds.ac.uk).

**The rise of the Liberals in Richmond (Surrey) 1964–2002.** Interested in hearing from former councillors, activists, supporters, opponents, with memories and insights concerning one of the most successful local organisations. What factors helped the Liberal Party rise from having no councillors in 1964 to 49 out of 52 seats in 1986? Any literature or news cuttings from the period welcome. Ian Hunter, 9 Defoe Avenue, Kew, Richmond TW9 4DL; 07771 785 795; [ianhunter@kew2.com](mailto:ianhunter@kew2.com).

**Liberals and the local government of London 1919–39.** Chris Fox, 173 Worplesdon Road, Guildford GU2 6XD; [christopher.fox7@virgin.net](mailto:christopher.fox7@virgin.net).

**Liberal politics in Sussex, Portsmouth and the Isle of Wight 1900–14.** The study of electoral progress and subsequent disappointment. Research includes comparisons of localised political trends, issues and preferred interests as against national trends. Any information, specifically on Liberal candidates in the area in the two general elections of 1910, would be most welcome. Family papers especially appreciated. Ian Ivatt, 84 High Street, Steyning, West Sussex BN44 3JT; [ianjivatt@tinyonline.co.uk](mailto:ianjivatt@tinyonline.co.uk).

**The Liberal Party in the West Midlands from December 1916 to the 1923 general election.** Focusing on the fortunes of the party in Birmingham, Coventry, Walsall and Wolverhampton. Looking to explore the effects of the party split at local level. Also looking to uncover the steps towards temporary reunification for the 1923 general election. Neil Fisher, 42 Bowden Way, Binley, Coventry CV3 2HU; [neil.fisher81@ntlworld.com](mailto:neil.fisher81@ntlworld.com).

**Recruitment of Liberals into the Conservative Party, 1906–1935.** Aims to suggest reasons for defections of individuals and develop an understanding of changes in electoral alignment. Sources include personal papers and newspapers; suggestions about how to get hold of the papers of more obscure Liberal defectors welcome. Cllr Nick Cott, 1a Henry Street, Gosforth, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, NE3 1DQ; [N.M.Cott@ncl.ac.uk](mailto:N.M.Cott@ncl.ac.uk).

**Liberal Unionists.** A study of the Liberal Unionist party as a discrete political entity. Help with identifying party records before 1903 particularly welcome. Ian Cawood, Newman University College, Birmingham; [i.cawood@newman.ac.uk](mailto:i.cawood@newman.ac.uk).

**Life of Wilfrid Roberts (1900–91).** Roberts was Liberal MP for Cumberland North (now Penrith and the Border) from 1935 until 1950 and came from a wealthy and prominent local Liberal family; his father had been an MP. Roberts was a passionate internationalist, and was a powerful advocate for refugee children in the Spanish civil war. His parliamentary career is coterminous with the nadir of the Liberal Party. Roberts joined the Labour Party in 1956, becoming a local councillor in Carlisle and the party's candidate for the Hexham constituency in the 1959 general election. I am currently in the process of collating information on the different strands of Roberts' life and political career. Any assistance at all would be much appreciated. John Reardon; [jbreardon75@hotmail.com](mailto:jbreardon75@hotmail.com).

**The political career of Edward Strutt, 1st Baron Belper.** Strutt was Whig/Liberal MP for Derby (1830–49), later Arundel and Nottingham; in 1856 he was created Lord Belper and built Kingston Hall (1842–46) in the village of Kingston-on-Soar, Notts. He was a friend of Jeremy Bentham and a supporter of free trade and reform, and held government office as Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Commissioner of Railways. Any information, location of papers or references welcome. Brian Smith; [brian63@inbox.com](mailto:brian63@inbox.com)

**Student radicalism at Warwick University.** Particularity the files affair in 1970. Interested in talking to anybody who has information about Liberal Students at Warwick in the period 1965–70 and their role in campus politics. Ian Bradshaw, History Department, University of Warwick, CV4 7AL; [I.Bradshaw@warwick.ac.uk](mailto:I.Bradshaw@warwick.ac.uk)

**Welsh Liberal Tradition – A History of the Liberal Party in Wales 1868–2003.** Research spans thirteen decades of Liberal history in Wales but concentrates on the post-1966 formation of the Welsh Federal Party. Any memories and information concerning the post-1966 era or even before welcomed. The research is to be published in book form by Welsh Academic Press. Dr Russell Deacon, Centre for Humanities, University of Wales Institute Cardiff, Cyncoed Campus, Cardiff CF23 6XD; [rdeacon@uwic.ac.uk](mailto:rdeacon@uwic.ac.uk).

**Aneurin Williams and Liberal internationalism and pacificism, 1900–22.** A study of this radical and pacifist MP (Plymouth 1910; North West Durham/Consett 1914–22) who was actively involved in League of Nations Movement, Armenian nationalism, international co-operation, pro-Boer etc. Any information relating to him and location of any papers/correspondence welcome. Barry Dackombe, 32 Ashburnham Road, Ampthill, Beds, MK45 2RH; [dackombe@tesco.net](mailto:dackombe@tesco.net).